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POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN ARUBA AND THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE

The following article was first presented at the Annual Conference of the Southwestern Political Science Association (USA) in 1984 and draws from a forthcoming PhD-dissertation by George Cvejnovich.

The island of Aruba may be the Caribbean's next independent mini-state. Aruba is currently one of the six islands comprising the Netherlands Antilles. The constitutional future of the Netherlands Antilles has been a major topic of discussion and negotiation between Aruba, the Antilles and the Netherlands since the early 1970s. The most recent series of negotiations and conferences on the subject has recommended that Aruba become independent in 1996 following a ten-year transition period in which it will gradually leave the Antillean federation.

The independence movement in Aruba technically began in the mid-1970s with the emergence of a new, pro-independence majority party. However, the origin of the movement is rooted in an earlier separatist movement which began in the 1930s. In many respects, the current independence movement (as our data will show) is still more of a separatist movement rather than an independence movement. Unfortunately, the non-Aruban actors (the Netherlands, Curaçao) involved in the constitutional negotiations have presented Aruba with only two options: independence or remain part of the Netherlands Antillean federation.

Evolution of the Independence Movement

Prior to 1937, the Netherlands Antilles were a crown colony of the Netherlands and were known as the Colony of Curaçao. As such Aruba was primarily governed from Curaçao. A lieutenant governor (gezaghebber), fully accountable to the governor in Curaçao was the chief official on the island. However, his power was very limited as is evident by the fact that it was not until 1945 that the "gezaghebber" could spend up to 300 fls (approximately \$.150) without the approval of the governor. As

one historian noted, Aruba was manipulated by the governor and by departmental heads in Curaçao.

In 1930, representatives of the Colonial Council in Curaçao arrived in Aruba for the first time to investigate the needs of the island. The Hague had also directed the Colonial Council to prepare the ground work for limited decentralization. In 1931 Aruba's District Council (which advised the gezaghebber) petitioned the Crown to include an article in the forthcoming constitution which could grant Aruba increased autonomy with respect to Curaçao.

One person who signed the petition was Henny Eman (1887 — 1957). Eman later founded one of Aruba's first political parties and advocated that Aruba secede from the Netherlands Antilles, but maintain close and direct ties with the Netherlands. This goal was known as "separacion".

The revised constitution that became effective in 1937 dissolved the Colonial Council and replaced it with a parliament, or "Staten". However, the power of the governor and The Hague remained largely untouched. Suffrage was limited. The "Staten" consisted of fifteen members, five of which were appointed by the governor. The ten remaining members were elected by proportional representation from the islands as follows: six from Curaçao, two from Aruba, one from Bonaire, and one from the Windward Islands (Saba, St. Maarten, and St. Eustatius). For the first time Aruba had a permanent representative in the government, indicating that the 1931 petition was not totally unheeded.

The first political party in the Antilles, the Catholic Peoples' Party (Katholieke Volkspartij — KVP) was formed in both Aruba and Curaçao in 1936. The KVP won Aruba's two "Staten" seats in 1937. In the 1941 "Staten" elections, Henny Eman ran as an independent and won Aruba's two seats. Eman was again reelected in 1945, but the KVP also won a seat.

Eman's campaign of "separacion" for Aruba obviously attracted a number of voters. This platform also advocated that Aruba and Curaçao have the same number of seats in the "Staten" (despite the fact that Curaçao's population was almost twice as large as Aruba's). Eman achieved this goal in time for the 1949 election: both islands now had eight seats. In those elections, the first with universal suffrage, Eman's new party, the Aruban People's Party (Arubaanse Volkspartij — AVP) won five of the eight seats.

Although Eman's "separacion movement was based on the long standing historical tension between Aruba and Curaçao, it was the transformation of the Aruban economy after the mid-1930s which gave the movement credibility. With the establishment of the Exxon oil refinery, Aruba was financially independent of Curaçao for the first time. The "separacion" movement, however, proved to be short-lived. ▶



Henny Eman

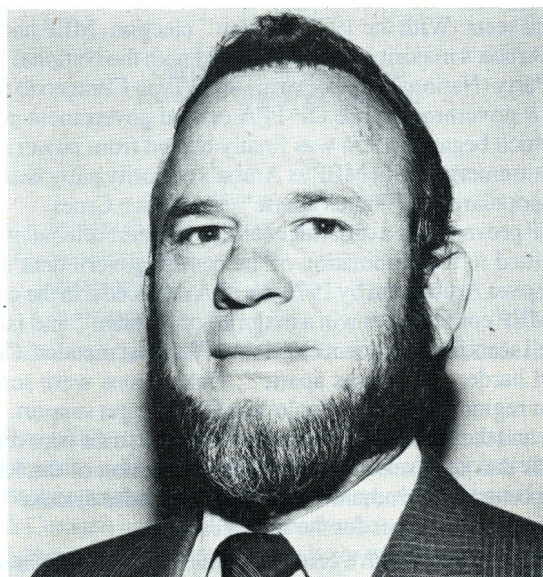
By 1950 the final constitutional structure for the Netherlands Antilles was decided on as a result of several conferences on decolonization. First the Netherlands Antilles as a federation were to be self-governing in all matters except foreign and defense policy. On those matters the Antilles were, with Suriname and the Netherlands, equal partners in the "Kingdom of the Netherlands". The central government of the Antilles was located in Curaçao, and the "Staten" was the principal governing body. Each island also now had an Island Council to deal with local affairs. Although the central government had limited powers, there was no provision in the constitution for any island to leave the federation and become a separate partner in the Kingdom. Finally, the allocation of "Staten" seats was again revised, reflecting the population distribution; Curaçao got 12 seats and Aruba got eight.

The 1950 election represented the beginning of the end of Eman's separatist movement and of AVP's status as the majority party. One of the cofounders of AVP, Juancho Irausquin, disagreed with Eman over the best way to insure Aruba's autonomy and formed a new party, the Aruban Patriotic Party (Partido Patriótico Arubano — PPA). In the election, AVP won four seats, PPA won two, and other minor parties took the remaining two. The decline of the AVP was also evident in the first Island Council election in 1951. Both AVP and PPA won eight of the 21 seats. By the time of the 1955 Island Council election, AVP's strength had so declined that it only won three seats. PPA's win of 15 seats in that election has never been beaten by any party in Aruba or Curaçao.

The decline of the AVP was the result of several factors. With the new constitution in effect and with Aruba's Island Council functioning, most voters felt that Aruba's struggle for autonomy was over. The fact that Eman helped form the central government coalition after the 1950 election did little to support his view that Curaçao was still a threat. Eman's inability to prevent the 12-8 distribution of "Staten" seats, as well as his pro-management position during a major strike at the refinery in 1951, also cost him support. Perhaps most important was the impact the refinery had on Aruba's social structure. Although the oil refinery provided Aruba with the financial independence necessary to demand greater autonomy, it also had a counter-veiling effect on "separacion". A large number of workers with Dutch citizenship came to Aruba from other "Dutch" islands and Suriname to work in the refinery. In 1950, 45 percent of Aruba's electorate had not been born in Aruba. Eman's "separacion" and rhetoric ("Aruba for Arubans") was viewed as a threat by this group. Consequently, the PPA, which took a more moderate position on the autonomy question, won the support of these non-Arubans. In the districts with a large percentage of non-Aruban-born voters, the PPA was the most successful.

With the emergence of the PPA as Aruba's majority party, the separatism issue faded. The PPA joined with the Democratic Party (DP) in Curaçao and the two formed the governing coalition from 1954 to 1973.

The AVP was able to make a brief revival at the island level in 1967. With the assistance of several minor parties, it took control of the Island Council for a few years. One candidate on AVP's election list that year was running for office for the first time and did relatively well being AVP's third most popular candidate. Betico Croes would later leave the AVP and found a pro-independence party which would become Aruba's majority party.



Betico Croes

The DP-PPA government was the target of labor and racial rioting in Curaçao in 1969 and was forced to resign. The "revolt" was the result of longstanding racial and labor conflict on that island. In the aftermath, two leftist black power parties emerged in Curaçao: the Labor and Liberation Front (Frente Obrero y Liberacion — FOL) and the New Antillean Movement (Movimiento Antiyas Nobo — MAN). Although the DP and PPA did well enough in the 1969 elections to be able to form a new government with the help of FOL, Antillean politics was undergoing a fundamental change.

The reaction in The Hague to the riots was to begin discussions about the eventual complete independence of the Netherlands Antilles. Both the quasi-socialist Netherlands government and Dutch public opinion were very uncomfortable with having to send marines to Curaçao to maintain order. Discussions were already underway regarding Suriname's independence, and the Antilles were added to the agenda. One parliamentarian in The Hague even suggested that the Antilles be given their independence immediately and via an "airmail letter".

The reaction in Aruba to the events in Curaçao was also one of shock. Aruban society did not have racial conflict to the extent that Curaçao did. Unlike Curaçao, whose population was largely black as a result of Curaçao being a slaving center, Aruba was largely of Arawak Indian descent. Many Arubans, especially in rural areas, held racist attitudes toward Curaçao. Arubans were most concerned about their position in an independent Antilles, especially if a presidential one-person/one-vote system advocated by Curaçao was implemented. The combination of these factors inevitably resulted in the rebirth of the separatist movement in Aruba.

A young activist group within the AVP under the leadership of Betico Croes, left that party and formed the People's Electoral Movement (Movimiento Electoral di Pueblo — MEP). The party's platform, known as "status aparte", argued that Aruba should leave the Antillean federation and become a separate partner in the Kingdom. Aruba could simply take the place of Suriname in the Kingdom Charter. Croes' "status aparte" idea was essentially the same Eman's earlier "separacion".

In the party's first election, 1971, it won a third of the Island

Council seats. With the 1973 "Staten" election, MEP had become Aruba's majority party and joined with the National People's Party (Nationale Volkspartij — NVP) in Curaçao to form the new government. The DP-PPA central government coalition which began in 1954 was finally ousted from power. The dramatic emergence of MEP as Aruba's majority party was due to the popularity of "status aparte" and Betico Croes.

MEP proved to be a difficult coalition partner, after all it was committed to the elimination of the central government's authority over Aruba, and by 1976 the PPA replaced it in the coalition. MEP continued to win a majority of "Staten" and Island Council seats in subsequent elections. With that mandate Croes pushed harder for "status aparte". Delegations were sent to various regional countries, including Cuba, to get support. The Hague and the Antillean government objected to the trips on the grounds that such missions were the jurisdiction of the Kingdom or central government. The Hague refused to discuss "status aparte" with Croes for the same reason.

Croes responded with a general strike in 1977 and threatened a unilateral declaration of independence. The Hague eventually agreed to discuss Aruba's future, but ruled out the possibility of "status aparte". Aruba could become independent on its own or with the rest of the Antilles. The Netherlands was determined to rid itself of all "colonies". Of course The Hague preferred that the islands stay together and attempted to show that an independent Aruba was not viable.

Croes now found himself in the difficult position of having to convince his constituency that independence was a better ultimate goal than was "status aparte" and that an independent Aruba could be viable. The other political parties in Aruba, particularly AVP, which was being revitalized by Eman's grandson (also known as Henny), took advantage of MEP's new direction and challenged the viability question. AVP put the issue in the most basic terms: were Arubans willing to give up their Dutch passports? This issue won the AVP new support.

Croes continued to campaign for independence, but stressed that the necessary groundwork be implemented first. Aruba would not allow itself to be pushed unprepared into independence. The example of Suriname was often cited as what not to do. Consequently, Croes offered the concept of an associated state (Aruba would maintain commonwealth ties with the Netherlands) as the appropriate form of independence. But many saw little difference between this and "status aparte".

Between 1980 and 1983 a series of conferences (the Kingdom Working Group, the Round Table Conference, the Commission of Seven) were held to discuss the Aruba question. The final outcome of the conferences appears to be that Aruba will become independent in 1996 after a ten-year transition period of "status aparte" beginning in 1986. Although most of the details of these two stages have yet to be worked out, the agreement was viewed by many as a major victory for Croes and MEP. The Hague had previously refused to accept "status aparte" even as a transition phase for fear that it would become permanent. Even with independence, Aruba will apparently maintain commonwealth ties with the Netherlands.

Survey of Political Attitudes

Thus far this paper has outlined the political evolution of the independence movement in Aruba. As noted above, the movement began as a separatist movement — Aruba should end its

ties with Curaçao and have direct ties with the Netherlands — and only became an independence movement when "status aparte" was rejected by The Hague. Given the history of the independence movement, an important question for many is whether Arubans really support independence or do they only support "status aparte". This is the main question which the survey attempts to answer.

The survey was conducted in November-December 1982 and consisted of a questionnaire mailed to a random sample of 1,000 voters. Although only 36 percent of the questionnaires were returned, for reasons discussed in the following footnote, those returned are a representative sample of the overall population. Three questions on the survey related directly to the concerns of this paper. The first question asked what should be the final constitutional structure for Aruba. The five choices were: 1) complete independence; 2) associated state — Aruba would be independent of Curaçao and have ties with Holland based on international law; 3) "status aparte" — Aruba would be independent of Curaçao and have ties with Holland based on constitutional law; 4) equal partnership with Curaçao in an Antillean state; 5) part of an Antillean state in which the president is elected by the system of one-person/one-vote. As the following table of results shows, there is some support for independence (especially if we include "associated state" in this category) but substantial support for "status aparte". It is also worth noting that few Arubans want to be part of an Antillean state.

TABLE 1
Desired Constitutional Structure
(rounded to nearest percent)

independence	12
associated state	26
status aparte	52
equal partners	10
president state	1

The second question asked what kind of relationship should Aruba have with Curaçao. The four alternatives were: 1) independence from each other; 2) cooperation as equals in foreign and defense policy; 3) cooperation as equals in foreign, defense, tax, monetary, and judicial policy; 4) keep the current relationship. As Table 2 indicates, the majority of Arubans want the islands to be independent of each other. Those who support some degree of cooperation are divided in two groups.

TABLE 2
Aruba-Curaçao Relationship
(rounded to nearest percent)

independence	56
limited cooperation	22
strong cooperation	20
current relationship	3

Since limited cooperation (i.e. foreign and defense policy) is not incompatible with "status aparte", we can say that less than 25 percent support any kind of constitutional link between the islands. A correlation of the first two questions (Table 3) shows fairly consistent attitudes: those favoring independence also favor independence vis-a-vis Curaçao, while those favoring "status aparte" are open to some cooperation with Curaçao (although a majority of this group still favors few ties with Curaçao). ▶

TABLE 3
Correlation of Q1 and Q2
(rounded to nearest percent)

		Q2		
		independence	limited cooperation	strong cooperation
Q1	independence	86	14	—
	associated state	62	20	18
	status aparte	57	24	17
	equal partners	—	22	64

The third survey question asked voters what kind of passport they wanted. The five alternatives included: 1) Aruban; 2) Antillean; 3) Dutch; 4) Venezuelan; 5) other. The results of this question clearly shows that few Arubans are willing to give up their Dutch passport.

TABLE 4
Passport Desired
(rounded to nearest percent)

Aruban	27
Antillean	3
Dutch	68
Venezuelan	—
other	2

When this question is correlated with the first question, voters' attitudes again appear to be relatively consistent. Those who favor independence also favor an Aruban passport while those supporting "status aparte" want to keep their current passport. Since "status aparte" always meant continued close ties with the Netherlands, this correlation was predictable.



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TABLE 5
Correlation of Q1 and Q3
(rounded to nearest percent)

		Q2		
		Aruban	Dutch	Antillean
Q1	independence	88	7	—
	associated state	36	62	—
	status aparte	14	82	—
	equal partner	—	81	19

Overall then, the survey results show that the independence movement in Aruba continues to be more of a separatist movement than an independence movement. Aruba's complaint is with Curaçao not with the Netherlands.

A final aspect of this paper analyzes the question of the polarization of the electorate. The leaders of the opposition parties (PPA and AVP) have often stated that Aruban society will become polarized if MEP pursues its goal of independence. Thus we have analyzed the data to see if there is a group whose attitudes differ significantly from the average.

When the electorate is divided in terms of age, sex, education, labor union membership, or race, we find no significant differences in the distribution of responses to the three questions when compared with the overall trends. When the electorate is divided along the lines of income, birthplace, and length of residence on the island we do find some differences. Those in the highest income bracket (\$ 1500 a month or more) as well as those not born in Aruba tend to give greater support to Aruba being part of an Antillean state than does the electorate as a whole (22 percent and 30 percent respectively, versus 10 percent).

Those who claimed that their ancestors arrived in Aruba before 1820 (the first wave of settlers) favored independence to a greater degree (24 percent) than the electorate as a whole (12 percent). (These tables are not reproduced for reasons of space but are available from the author).

With regard to the category of political party membership, we find the most significant differences. This then explains the statements of the opposition parties. For these tables we selected only those who had voted for party X in the most recent election and planned to vote for the same party in the next election. The subsample, which was 80 percent (n = 288) of the respondents, continued to reflect the overall strength of the parties (PPA — 12%, AVP — 30%, MEP — 58%).

As the following series of three tables shows, MEP voters are more supportive of independence than is the electorate as a whole, and PPA voters are much less supportive. AVP voters fall between PPA voters and the electorate as a whole. ▶

TABLE 6
Desired Constitutional Structure
(rounded to nearest percent)

	MEP	AVP	PPA	Overall
independence	16	5	—	12
associated state	34	23	6	26
status aparte	50	55	34	52
equal partners	—	17	51	10
president state	—	—	9	1

TABLE 7
Aruba-Curaçao Relationship
(rounded to nearest percent)

	MEP	AVP	PPA	Overall
independence	74	36	14	56
limited cooperation	19	28	23	22
strong cooperation	7	32	46	20
current relationship	—	5	17	3

TABLE 8
Passport Desired
(rounded to nearest percent)

	MEP	AVP	PPA	Overall
Aruban	43	7	—	27
Antillean	—	6	3	3
Dutch	55	84	97	68
Venezuelan	—	1	—	—
other	2	2	—	2

The question of polarization appears to be party-based rather than based on age, race, education, sex, or income. There are significant differences between parties, especially between MEP and PPA. However, one must remember that PPA represents less than 15 percent of the electorate, while MEP represents 60 percent.

In general terms, 90 percent of the electorate support "status aparte" or independence. Essentially none of the electorate want to be part of an Antillean state even if Aruba is an equal partner with Curaçao in that state. Similarly, most of the electorate (78 percent) want little or no formal cooperation with Curaçao. At the same time, however, most of the electorate (68 percent) want to keep their Dutch passports. This may appear to be a contradiction but is really the definition of "status aparte" — that Aruba should be independent of Curaçao, but maintain close ties with the Netherlands. Unfortunately, the Netherlands is no longer interested in such close ties.

The proposed constitutional future for Aruba — "status aparte" from 1986 to 1996 and independence thereafter is compatible with the goals of MEP, Aruba's majority party. However, the electorate as a whole would prefer to stop with "status aparte". Even half of the MEP voters prefer "status aparte" to independence. Thus even among MEP supporters there is serious concern about the viability of an independent Aruba whose economy is now almost entirely dependent on tourism. Perhaps what might occur is that as 1996 draws near, Aruban political leaders will attempt to extend the "status aparte" transition period by several years, or even attempt to make it permanent. ■

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